

**Article Title:** *Watch with baby: Cinema, parenting and community*

**Submitted to:** *European Journal of Cultural Studies*

**Abstract:** *This article examines women's experiences of attending the cinema with their babies at dedicated screenings in one Glasgow cinema. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with 25 women, the article explores the possibilities of pleasure that exist in this context, arguing that watching with baby is most consistently experienced as pleasurable when women are able to reconcile their expectations as adult cinemagoers with their new roles as mothers. Pleasure depends less on film choice than on possibilities for community and for intimacy that are created in the re-configured cinema space. The emphasis on the cinema space, its organisation and the relationships made possible within it is reminiscent of historical accounts of cinemagoing and poses something of a challenge to more contemporary accounts of audiences organised around film texts. This study also begins to consider the ways in which this particular leisure practice fits with – and occasionally conflicts with – discourses of 'good' parenting in women's accounts.*

**Keywords:** *Cinema, audiences, parenting, intimacy, community.*

**Word count:** 8027

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**Biographical note:** Karen Boyle is a Senior Lecturer in Film & Television Studies at the University of Glasgow. She is the author of *Media & Violence: Gendering the Debates* and editor of the forthcoming collection *Everyday Pornography* (Routledge, 2010). She has published articles on feminist television criticism, the effects debates, and the representation of gendered violence in a range of journals and edited collections.

### ***Watch with baby: Cinema, Parenting and Community***

In August 2008, BBC Radio 4's *iPM* programme investigated a 'new trend' in cinemagoing in response to a comment from a horrified listener:

There's a new fashion going on at the moment where parents are bringing young babies into the cinema when they are showing adult films and I'm concerned about this because these young babies, in their development, haven't really reached maturity of any kind and they are open to all sorts of things that could damage their brains, or damage their eyes even, or even their hearing. I think it's absolutely shocking and I feel it's a form of abuse.  
(Martha Crawley, *iPM*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2008)

The presenter then interviewed psychologist Aric Sigman who acknowledged that babies were unlikely to understand the content on screen but nevertheless emphasised their possible responses to violent content. Sigman expressed his concern differently – emphasising 'technical effects' of screen violence (sound, lighting, editing) – but similarly made no reference to the actual behaviour of babies at dedicated screenings. Implicit in both comments was a criticism of selfish parents, ignoring the wellbeing of their babies in order to pursue their own leisure. Indeed, Sigman concluded that, instead of taking babies to the cinema, parents should

either prevail upon a neighbour or a loved one or shell out for a babysitter. A terrible choice I know, I have to make it myself. (Aric Sigman, *iPM*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2008)

At the time this programme was broadcast I had recently completed a series of interviews with women attending dedicated baby screenings at a local cinema. This research project had first formed in my mind as a response to the somewhat bemused (but never openly hostile) responses I had encountered when describing baby screenings to friends and colleagues after the birth of my son in 2007. However, it was the experience of watching *No Country for Old Men* (Coen & Coen, 2007) in a cinema with nearly fifty babies and a number of uncomfortable mums that really convinced me there was a project to be done.

I mention these origins to emphasise the extent to which the research is inevitably, situated within broader discourses about cinema, audiences and parenting. From the outset, I was aware that I was researching a phenomenon that troubled common-sense assumptions both about what cinema is for (the rapt viewing of films) and about good or responsible parenting (which, as Crawley and Sigman suggest is bound up in notions of protecting children and parental self-sacrifice). Through the participant observation and interviews conducted for this project it became clear that other women in the audience were also negotiating a series of expectations about cinemagoing and parenting and this

article reflects on the conditions in which those negotiations were most successful and pleasurable, as well as on the occasions which proved more troubling.

As such, it offers a modest intervention in debates about parenting, children and media which have, thus far, largely concentrated on domestic media consumption (e.g. Lemish, 1987; Buckingham, 1993, 1996; Seiter, 1999; Briggs 2006, 2007), family viewing contexts (e.g. Morley, 1986) or women's media consumption in the context of family responsibilities (e.g. Hobson, 1982; Radway, 1984; Gray, 1992). By focusing on one specific point in the parenting cycle (baby's first year), this study also begins to open up questions about how women's relationships to home and the public sphere are altered not simply by becoming mothers but by the particular experience of maternity leave. Much of the foundational work on family viewing was, as David Morley (1992: 159-69) notes, conducted at a time when the organisation of middle-class family life – especially women's patterns of un/paid work – was much different than it is now. In contrast, the current research suggests the importance of the *life cycle* in understanding audiences' relationships to media use in public and private spheres.

Of course, these experiences are still structured by differences, not least in relation to class, and, the account produced here is a specifically middle-class one. In making this statement, I mean to reflect not only on the demographic characteristics of my respondents (who were primarily middle class) but also on the parenting discourses within which their accounts are embedded. As I have noted elsewhere (Boyle, 2009) with reference to the work of Val Gillies (2005), the idea that parenting is a skill or role to be *learned* is a relatively new one that has achieved a particular currency in Britain in the New Labour era. It is also an idea that has been embraced more enthusiastically by the middle classes than by the working classes who have been more obviously targeted for governmental intervention in this area. As such, the particular ways in which the women in my study talked about getting to grips with their roles as mothers – and the extent to which cinemagoing worked within that autobiography – may be peculiarly middle-class.

In its emphasis on the materiality and organisation of the cinema, and on the relationships which are possible within it, this article also offers a rather different perspective to much of the work on contemporary film audiences which has emphasised the film text and audience responses to it (e.g. Hill, 1997; Austin, 2002; Barker et al 2001; Barker & Mathijs, 2008), with little empirical work on the contemporary *cinema* audience (Hubbard, 2003). A partial exception to this is Martin Barker and Kate Brooks' study of cinema audiences for *Judge Dredd*. However, even here the cinema is approached through film and questions around the possible meanings and pleasures the film offers (albeit within specific locations and for specific audience groupings) remain central (Barker & Brooks 1998: 148). The current research is rather different as it begins with a cinema and an audience gathered within it. Although I did ask my interviewees questions about the films they had watched, it was not their viewing

of specific titles that my respondents shared. As such, the most obvious antecedents for this research are historical accounts of cinema audiences which have variously emphasised locality and location, architecture, furnishing and facilities, the regulation and organisation of audiences, audience behaviour and patterns of attendance, as well as investments in particular stars, genres and films to provide a rich sense of cinemagoing as a socially, historically and autobiographically significant practice (e.g. Geraghty, 2000; Harper & Porter, 1999; Jancovich et al, 2003; Lacey, 1999; Stacey, 1994). In highlighting specific functions of cinemagoing at a particular moment in the lives of its audience, this study may therefore contribute to wider debates – within the academy and outside of it - about what cinema is, or can be, *for* in a period where its position as a privileged site for the viewing of films is under threat.

In the next section I provide a short introduction to dedicated baby screenings, the cinema at the centre of this study and my methods. I then discuss the pleasures that ‘Watch With Baby’ offers to mothers, focusing on the environmental and social conditions which enable them to enjoy the experience. In these accounts the women are able to fit their cinemagoing into a broader discourse about good parenting in a way that is in contrast to their expressed anxieties over television. In the final section, I examine the occasions when this reconciliation cannot be achieved and cinemagoing becomes another activity imbued with anxieties around good parenting and women’s entitlement to leisure. It is at this point that the *film* becomes more central to women’s accounts.

### ***The concept, the cinema, the project***

Dedicated screenings for babies and their carers are a relatively new phenomenon in the UK, becoming a midweek fixture of predominately urban cinemas in the last 5-10 years. In Glasgow during the period of research there were four cinemas offering such screenings: two Odeon multiplex cinemas, both located in retail parks; the Glasgow Film Theatre, a city-centre independent cinema; and the Grosvenor, an independent cinema located in Glasgow’s West End (one of Glasgow’s more affluent areas). Of these four, only the Grosvenor – the focus of this study – offered a *weekly* screening: it was by far the best attended and a second ‘Watch With Baby’ screening has since been added to its weekly programme.

The Grosvenor has two 100-seat auditoriums, furnished with armchair-style seats and sofas, and shows predominately new releases with an emphasis on mainstream titles. The cinema is attached to a bar/ café (The Lane) and tea/coffee is included in the £5 ticket price for the dedicated baby screenings. The films on offer at these dedicated screenings are generally taken from the main programme and play at a slightly reduced volume with house lights left on low. Whilst there is a policy not to show 18-certificates, the programme is otherwise fairly diverse: during the period of study the

films screened included *Sicko* (Moore, 2007), *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Kapur, 2007), *The Darjeeling Ltd* (Anderson, 2007), *The Jane Austen Book Club* (Swicord, 2007), *The Kite Runner* (Forster, 2007), *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), *Son of Rambow* (Jennings, 2007) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961). During these screenings, the auditorium was typically littered with car seats, bulky changing bags and changing mats. Adult audience members would strike up conversations with one another whilst settling, feeding and playing with their babies. Not surprisingly, the infant audience was often noisy and there was much movement about the cinema: crawling and toddling in the aisles, nappy-changing at the back and parents standing by the exit with fractious babies. People often arrived late or left early. All adults were accompanied by babies (0-12months) and it is the Grosvenor policy that adults not in the company of babies are refused entry. Although advertised as 'exclusive to babies and their carers', the vast majority of the adult audience during the period studied was female and those men who did attend were usually in the company of female partners.<sup>i</sup>

My involvement with Watch With Baby began in November 2007 when my son was three-months old. I formalised my academic involvement the following January when I began to keep a research journal about our weekly outings, my son's responses and discussions with other mums. I completed fifteen weeks of participant observation and conducted twenty-five interviews with audience members (recruited through word-of-mouth and flyers distributed at the Grosvenor) and another with the cinema manager. The mothers I interviewed all attended Watch With Baby at some point during the period of observation. They ranged in age from 27-44, all were white, the majority lived in or near Glasgow's West End, twenty one (84%) were first-time mothers, all were in relationships with the father of their baby at the time of interview, and the majority (24/25) had been in employment or education prior to the birth of their child and were intending to return – often on a fractional basis - within a year of their baby's birth. In all of these respects, the women I interviewed seemed broadly representative of the many more women attending Watch With Baby who I spoke to informally over the course of this project and confirm that – in this cinema and this location at least – this is an activity pursued by women who, by a number of criteria, could be defined as middle class (Boyle, 2009).

I have discussed my methodology in more detail elsewhere (Boyle, 2009), so here will simply note that I was careful to position myself as both a researcher *and* (first-time) mum and that women were more than willing to talk to me and to offer often very personal details of their lives with their babies. The interviews were typically conducted with babies (mine and the interviewee's) in tow but childcare practices existed alongside the interview rather than providing interruptions: talk about cinema could be incorporated into childcare routines with relative ease, often leading to more general reflections on the practicalities of childcare. All the interviews were recorded and the questions covered three main areas: cinemagoing patterns and preferences prior to their baby's birth; women's

experiences of the dedicated screenings (including motivations for and patterns of attendance, first experience, favourite and least favourite films, comparison with other parent-and-baby activities) and perceptions of their baby's responses. It is the women's experiences of Watch With Baby which I will focus on in the remainder of this article.<sup>ii</sup>

### ***Watching with baby: Intimacy, community and good parenting***

Watch With Baby, the title chosen by the Grosvenor for its baby-cinema strand, is an obvious play on the BBC's 1950s programming for children (*Watch With Mother*). There may be pragmatic reasons for the shift in emphasis from mother to baby (the cinema is keen to attract Dads too), but it nevertheless encapsulates one of the central appeals of cinemagoing for the women in my study: namely that it provided a space where they were not *only* mothers. Beth<sup>iii</sup> summed up the feelings of many:

[the appeal is] being like a normal grown up I suppose, being able to do something you did before, you know, it's quite exciting to be able to come to the cinema and bring your baby, you know, and also not feel awkward about it. (14/04/08)

The dedicated baby screening allowed Beth to reconnect with something from her 'previous' life precisely because it catered to her new and different needs (and those of her baby). Watch With Baby thus offered the pleasure of a familiar activity in a reconfigured space. The reconfiguration – or colonisation – of the cinema space was a recurring theme. Entering this space for the first time the women had to learn how it operates, both in general terms and with specific reference to their baby.<sup>iv</sup> The presence of other mums and babies eased orientation, but the management's attempts to re-configure the space and experience with this audience in mind was also appreciated (for example, in the provision of refreshments, the discounted ticket price and provision of changing mats at the back of the auditorium).

For women who had attended screenings at other cinemas, the Grosvenor was usually seen as *uniquely* successful in this respect. Cathy, for instance, stated:

[at the multiplex] you were taking your baby to see a movie. Whereas there's very much a community with the Grosvenor. (26/03/08)

Being part of a community legitimated an activity the mums otherwise described as an indulgence: 'my escape' (Lotty, 26/06/08), 'me time' (Angela, 05/05/08), 'something for me' (Caroline, 23/04/08). The

solidarity also allowed the women to feel less self-conscious in their roles as mothers. As Julie put it: 'everyone's sitting there with a baby and if your baby is having a flaky no-one really bats an eyelid because their baby might do it the following week or maybe they've done it before' (05/08/07). The darkness and relative anonymity of the cinema space facilitated this sense of solidarity: everyone was 'in the same boat' but parenting skills were less obviously on show here than in other parent-and-baby settings. Rather than providing a distraction from the film, the women's awareness of other mothers and babies - even screaming babies - provided reassurance and gave the women permission to concentrate on the film (or themselves) so long as their own baby's physical needs were being met. Although it may seem counterintuitive to describe the experience of watching a movie with up to 60 babies as 'relaxing' this is, indeed, how many women described it and they noted that the film itself could be quite incidental to this. As such, if the film was not experienced as pleasurable the experience could still be: if nothing else, Helen and Rachel suggested, they could always have a sleep - a pleasure not to be underestimated!

While part of the appeal of dedicated baby screenings was escaping some of the demands of motherhood for a short time, my interviewees also described the pleasures of being with their babies in this context. It may come as a surprise to Crawley and Sigman that one of the key pleasures the cinema offered my interviewees was the opportunity for what Charlotte calls 'cuddling for cuddling's sake' (12/03/08): non-instrumental physical intimacy. Although this was not something I asked about directly, the pleasure of intimacy was a recurring theme across virtually all of the interviews. In going to the cinema women were creating a dedicated block of time to be with their baby: in most cases, holding the baby throughout. Warmth, security and closeness were repeatedly mentioned and, again, it was both the organisation of the semi-public space of the cinema (its darkness, comfort, anonymity) and the sense of community that facilitated this.

It would be overstating the case to say that the film was always *incidental* and many women did pick and choose depending on the programme. Nonetheless, a significant proportion of women turned up not knowing what film was showing and saw films they did not necessarily enjoy, harking back to accounts of cinema in earlier historical periods which have emphasised habit, ritual and routine (e.g. Geraghty, 2000). Indeed, many women struggled to remember which films they had seen. As I discuss in more detail elsewhere (Boyle 2009), the women were at least as interested in the abstract, formal qualities of the film - and in their baby's perceived responses to them - as in narrative elements and, in this respect, their accounts of 'watching with baby' resonate with accounts of the audiences for 'early' cinema. Both baby and mother were (like those early audiences) learning how to be a cinema-audience and, for the mothers, the cinema became a site for the re-negotiation of identity and, specifically, their new relationship to public space.



To explore some of these themes in a little more detail, I want to turn now to a fairly lengthy extract from my interview with Sam. The first film Sam saw at Watch With Baby was *Juno* (Reitman 2008). This was a deliberate choice - she had 'heard positive things' about the film which motivated her to go along. Nevertheless, when I asked her to 'tell me a bit about that first experience' the film itself was barely mentioned:

I really loved it actually. First of all I was really surprised at her [her daughter], I mean she just was absorbed. I mean you feel really guilty if the telly is on at home, because you're not supposed to watch television or stuff. But you know with this you can't get away from it you just have to totally go with it. And she was just like 'sensory overload!'. She just 'wow' looked at the screen and she was just... you could just see her totally engrossed in what was going on. So she was really interested in it, really absorbed, so just obviously really enjoyed it. And I felt like, particularly because of the size of the seats and stuff in the Grosvenor you've got plenty of room, so when she was hungry, when she started to squirm a bit, and I tried to feed her and she was happy to feed. Sometimes if there's lots going on she doesn't like to feed because she likes to see what's going on elsewhere, but she was really calm. It was a really relaxing experience and once I knew that she was going to be ok, and I wasn't going to be worried about 'do I have to take her out?' [...] it felt like a real treat because I don't get the opportunity to sit and give her a cuddle for two hours and sit and have her just sit on my lap, and that was really nice. It was a great film. She had a good new experience. And I got to give her a cuddle, and I got to just sit and be with my baby for a couple of hours and that was something I didn't expect, I didn't think about ... what a nice experience that was, just to be, because she won't sit still normally or she wants to do things, or I feel like I should be doing things with her. So it was a good excuse, you know you can't go anywhere, you've got a good valid reason for being here. (07/04/08)

Sam's memory of this event (a month earlier) is evocative and sensory and suggests that Watch With Baby offers opportunities for positive parenting. For Sam, as for most of my interviewees, two hours cradling her baby was inconceivable in other contexts, both because of other demands on her time and because she was aware of external ideas about 'good parenting' which involve *doing* a wide variety of things and in which parenting is a skill to be learned, worked at and constantly (re-)evaluated. Most of the other activities the mums did with their babies were in that pedagogic mode (learning, interacting, developing) or were more clearly related to their babies' health and wellbeing (massage, yoga, swimming). The cinema provided some time off from 'doing good parenting' in this sense, but could nevertheless be reconciled with some of these external discourses: it involved getting out the house, being in a stimulating environment which offered both the reassurance of routine (this is what we do every Thursday morning) and sensory stimulation whilst also providing an opportunity for sustained physical intimacy.

As such, the films that 'worked' – that parents felt most comfortable watching with their babies – could be unpredictable and in some ways counter-intuitive. For babies bright, light colours were

thought to be more important than content in most cases (with exceptions which I'll discuss in more detail below). Otherwise, it was generally accepted that, as the films were *for* the parents – with young babies typically paying intermittent attention to the screen at most – diversity in film choice was appropriate and desirable. There was some disagreement over the presence of subtitled films on the programme, however. Paula, for instance, claimed that subtitled films were inappropriate due to the level of attention they demanded from the mother and other women agreed, some deliberately avoiding such screenings. However, as the interview with Paula progressed, she named *The Kite Runner* - a sub-titled film - as one of her favourite Watch With Baby films. In this respect Paula's interview resonates with the experiences of many of the women attending Watch With Baby: they had a set of expectations about what it would be like and what would or would not be appropriate, desirable and possible; yet their actual engagements with the films were, in some ways, fairly un-self-conscious. That is, they were able to tap into their skills as long-standing film viewers to gain meaning and significance from a film. As Sam put it when I asked her about how Watch With Baby is different than other cinemagoing experiences: "There's not a huge amount of difference. It feels like going to the cinema, it feels like a proper cinema experience". Particularly for first time mothers, for whom learning the role of a mother can be particularly demanding if not fraught, cinema-going had a reassuring familiarity, positioning them as competent adults entitled to leisure.

However, the unprompted comparison with television at the beginning of the extract from Sam's interview underlines that what is at stake here is not simply film and its pleasures but, more specifically, the appeal of *cinema*. Sam's description of her daughter's responses to the film depends on the sensory qualities associated with its cinema projection: they 'can't get away from' it and have to 'totally go with it'. Moreover, whether in unprompted comments like Sam's, or in response to the specific questions about television which I asked at the end of the interview, this favourable comparison of cinema with television was common. Middle-class parents' expressions of distaste for television – and concerns about its effects - have been noted by other researchers, including David Buckingham (1993, 1996) who argues that such arguments may be produced in part because it is assumed this is what the researchers want to hear. In other words, the discourse around 'good parenting' and television is so powerful that any research encounter dealing with middle-class parents, children and parenting will – at least in part – be a response to this. Certainly, my study does not provide evidence about how these women *actually* watched television but the differences in their accounts of cinema and television were revealing. When television was positively appraised this was usually in relation to *other* people. So, for instance, Charlotte, felt conflicted about having the television on when *she* was at home with her baby but understood her husband's TV viewing with their daughter as 'bonding'. Typically, it was *women's own* television viewing which was the source of anxiety, troubling their sense, or presentation, of

themselves as good mothers. Sam made this clear in her comment that she felt '*guilty*' about television viewing, that it was not something she was '*supposed*' to do with her baby. Here, her comments resonate with classic studies on domestic viewing where women's ability to negotiate work and leisure emerge as key themes (e.g. Hobson, 1982; Gray, 1992). This may be because of the age of the babies at the time of interview: some mums explicitly commented that they were trying to 'hold off' introducing their baby to television and saw this as related to their slightly unreal daily lives on maternity leave and their refusal to recognise themselves in the address of daytime television. At the time of interview, the home was their primary place of work but this was both a *new* and, for most, relatively *temporary* experience. During maternity leave, the home was the place where their work as mothers was most visible to themselves and others. 'Just' sitting down to cuddle their baby (whether in the presence of absence or television) was incompatible with that.

Yet, whilst Sam had detailed reasons for not watching television with her baby, later in the interview she talked about television in a more positive light as something that her daughter could share with her step-brothers. In general, the presence of siblings seemed to lead to less anxiety around television, perhaps because television was more likely to be equated with *children's* television and seen as interactive, at least to some extent. This perception of children's television chimes with the way in which the BBC has attempted to brand its CBeebies channel (which targets 0-6 year olds) as providing opportunities for parental teaching and children's learning (Briggs 2009), and this may offer a further explanation of why television and cinema-going were so differently perceived by the women in my study. As children's television has become part of the 'curricularization' of family life whereby parent-child 'leisure' time must be channelled into educationally beneficial activities (Buckingham and Scanlon 2003: 6), it is perhaps not surprising that cinema is perceived by as offering an escape that television – embedded in so many contradictory discourses around parenting, the domestic, education, responsibility and risk - cannot.

Finally, it is worth noting that there remains a certain cultural value attached to cinemagoing. For many of my interviewees Watch With Baby provided an opportunity to engage with a wider variety of films than they might have previously chosen to see. Even if those films were not in themselves perceived as 'good', they allowed the women to engage with a wider world. As Danni put it, nicely encapsulating the tension between the 'normal' and 'new mum' worlds which many of my interviewees described: "It's nice be able to able to keep in touch with the latest films and with what's happening *even though* you're a mum" (06/05/08, emphasis mine). In drawing this section to a close, I want to return to Sam and her comments on her favourite Watch With Baby film:

I think *The Diving Bell & The Butterfly* [Schnabel, 2008] was my favourite. [...] I really enjoyed the film. But I think... well the other films they were fluffy, it was *Juno* and *Run Fat Boy Run* [Schwimmer, 2007] I saw, they were fluffy films, they didn't take any thought processes, and the last one, it felt more like going to the cinema, it felt more like something for me. It felt more like, oh this, you know, this is getting me thinking, this is interesting, it's a bit more cultural, it's a bit more... and I felt a wee bit... less like I was with a baby as well. [...] this is the kind of thing I used to go and see, this is the kind of thing I used to be interested in. And I actually came out of that thinking oh I must read more books, I must go and do things for myself, coz it just, it wasn't a particularly deep film or anything but it just made me think and it was a different kind of thing and less fluffy and more removed from being with a baby. And it was a very good film. [...] I mean I'm not a particularly cultured person but it's just nice to do something that doesn't involve tears and snotters and breast milk and something for a while [laughing]. (07/04/08)

Of course for Sam Watch With Baby *did* still involve 'tears and snotters and breast milk' and, as demonstrated above, the physical pleasure of being with her daughter was an important aspect of her experience. Rather than seeing these accounts as contradictory, however, I want to suggest that together they exemplify the appeal of Watch With Baby at its best: it allows the women to be more than mums, to engage in an activity that is familiar enough to enable them to 'switch off' if that's what they most need to do, or to engage and challenge them if the viewing conditions are right, allowing them to (re-)engage with a wider culture. But this is only possible because their 'mum-selves' (and their babies) are also content. In other words, it offers an opportunity to reconcile a former sense of self with their new identities as mothers. However, this was not always the case for the women I interviewed and, in the next section, I will explore less positive experiences when the women's maternal responsibilities most sharply came into conflict with old pleasures.

### **No Place for Young Babies?**

Regardless of women's film preferences before baby, three films were mentioned more than any other as problematic, inappropriate or unpleasurable: *The Savages* (Jenkins, 2007), *The Golden Compass* (Weitz, 2007) and *No Country for Old Men*.

*The Savages* was singled out by some interviewees for its depressing content and tone. For Nicole, Rachel and Caroline, it was a film they might have enjoyed in a different context. But, in this slot, it did not work:

Caroline: And I actually came out and said to the two guys at the desk 'we're slitting our wrists in there do you want to put on something a bit more, a bit more em  
[Karen: cheerier?]

Caroline: not just, I said I don't want any romcoms but just something with a bite, more bite in it, that's going to entertain us.' (23/04/08)

Whilst Caroline was clear that she appreciated films with 'bite' and was particularly dismissive of romantic comedy (the most featured genre), the tone of *The Savages* was too sharply at odds with an experience that – as we have seen – was typically characterised as warm and intimate. This film did not raise concerns relative to their *babies'* experiences: rather it made the women feel bad *in themselves*. In contrast, the other two films created difficulties for a number of women because of anxieties about their baby being exposed to (or being *seen* to be exposed to) these particular films. This may seem surprising in relation to *The Golden Compass* – an adaptation of a popular children's book with a PG-rating – but here the main concern was volume and, indeed, a number of my interviewees recalled complaining about this to cinema staff both during and after the screening. This disrupted the experience, their concern *as mothers* preventing them from engaging with the film *as cinemagoers*. Although it may seem somewhat counter-intuitive, films aimed at children may be particularly *ill-suited* to Watch With Baby precisely because of their volume, which takes into account the noisiness of a child-filled cinema. Children's films may also work against one of the central appeals of the dedicated screenings for women: 'time off' from child-orientated life.

Not surprisingly, violent content was routinely mentioned as a concern, with some women avoiding films they deemed inappropriate on these grounds and others deliberately shielding their baby from the screen when they did attend. However, what was at stake was rarely a genuine fear that – as Crawley and Sigman suggest – these images could be damaging for the baby as the following exchange from Caroline's interview (following her comment about *The Savages*) demonstrates:

K: So that was inappropriate would you say just because of the tone, just because it was so depressing?

C: Yeah, yeah.

K: So that was my next set of questions, what's appropriate and what's not for the 'Watch With Baby'. Were there any other films you felt weren't appropriate for that slot?

C: Well, the thing is it's for us, but I do feel this responsibility that I have to cover her face up [laughs] if there's something like...luckily I was out changing a nappy when Mary Queen of Scots got the head cut off. [*The Other Boleyn Girl*, Chadwick, 2008]. (23/04/08)

Caroline described shielding her daughter from the screen with a tone of wry amusement – and many other mums adopted a similar strategy both in front of the screen and in interview. There was a consensus that the babies were too young to understand what they are seeing and so the women were not acting out of fear for their babies, but were rather behaving in a socially-appropriate way which allowed them to reconcile expectations of them as mothers with their experience as cinemagoers. In

other words, they were responding not only to the film but to broader discourses around parenting, children and media violence.

Perhaps more than any other title, *No Country for Old Men* caused difficulties for the women I spoke to. However, this response was by no means uniform and it attracted a considerable number of male viewers.<sup>v</sup> For Beth, *No Country for Old Men* was her first Watch With Baby film and she was delighted to find it on the programme: 'I was quite excited. I was like, *No Country for Old Men*? That's so cool.' It was also Chris's first time, but she experienced it much less positively, describing it as 'that awful one'. In this extract it is clear that Chris's discomfort was not simply because of the film's content, but because of the way this reflected on her decision to take her baby to the cinema in the face of her husband's opposition:

C: I think the opening scene someone got strangled, so I wasn't ... I didn't know what to do. My husband had told me the film was very violent, I shouldn't take the baby. And I thought, oh god, she's going to be scarred forever

K: Right so were you worried about how she was responding to it?

C: Uh-huh, yeah.

K: And were you aware of her responding in any way?

C: No she was very young so I think... the loud noises and it was quite a dark film so she probably wasn't paying that much attention really. It's not like some of the brighter films. Like the one last week [*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Stoller, 2008] was quite light and she was looking at the lights and things so she probably wasn't paying that much attention but I thought, oh my husband's told me not to come and I'm here and...

K: Right. So how did you feel about that the first time then?

C: I felt really guilty yeah.

K: Because of the content?

C: Yeah. I felt... I was hoping they weren't going to be like that again. Not that I check before I go. So if the next one had been just as bad I probably would have felt bad.

K: Might not have gone back?

C: Yeah. Uh-huh. It was quite a violent one.

K: So it made you feel quite bad?

C: Yeah, uh-huh. Yeah.

K: Because...So why?

C: I think if I'd been a few times and they'd been comedies or like the other ones, maybe the off-the-wall ones like *The Kite Runner* and things, if they'd been like that and then I'd gone to see that one I'd have thought, oh it's just a first release, it's fine, they're just showing it because we're mums and we perfectly have a right to see these sort of films, but it was first one and my husband had told me not to come and I'm like oh don't be so stupid, and em, in the cinema a lot of people were covering the babies' eyes and things and it made me feel even worse and I just thought oh I really probably shouldn't have brought the baby to this film, it was a bizarre one to show with children but I don't know how much they pick up,

K: Yeah. Did you talk to your husband about it afterwards?

C: No, I just never mentioned it again [laughs] he knew we'd been but he was annoyed so there was no point causing a fight really.

As the comparison between *No Country for Old Men* and *The Kite Runner* - which hinges on the rape of a young boy - demonstrates it was not violence *per se* that was the problem. Rather, it was the *explicit* scenes of violence, combined with the knowledge of her husband's disapproval and the evident discomfort of some other mums, that caused Chris such difficulty. Chris stated that she was worried she had scarred her baby for life, echoing her husband's strong disapproval; yet, she knew that her daughter had been uninterested in the film. She did not think the film should necessarily *not* be shown in this slot and, indeed, this experience didn't stop her becoming a regular baby-cinagoer. Like others, she appreciated the diversity of the programme which positioned her and other mothers as thinking adults, able to make decisions for themselves. Yet, there is a balance to be struck. Women trusted the Grosvenor, and enjoyed the experience almost independent of film choice, meaning that many did not check which films were showing prior to arrival and very few were ever aware of the film's certification. The scheduling of a film in this slot was understood to be a public statement about its suitability, granting the women permission to be there with their babies.

This balancing act was particularly obvious in Jenny's account. Jenny had been a keen cinemagoer before the birth of her son and attended Watch With Baby regularly for six months. When I first spoke to Jenny she was keen to be involved in the research because she was irritated by the refusal to show 18-certificate films and frustrated by the dominance of romantic comedy. And yet, Jenny also really struggled with *No Country for Old Men*: 'I didn't feel good about my film experience at all that day [...] I couldn't watch it and I really felt odd when - me and the baby sitting there and this man being strangled - because it was so well done.' Despite her confidence that the film had no influence on her son (who slept through it) and despite her appreciation of the film ('it was so well done'), Jenny recognised the tension between her desires as a cinemagoer and her embodied experiences as a mother. Whilst these uncomfortable experiences were in the minority, they underline my argument that Watch With Baby is at its best when it allows the women to be both 'normal grown ups' and 'new mums'. As such, films which provoke particular anxieties over their roles and responsibilities as mums could be uncomfortable: *not* because the women were genuinely fearful for their babies (except in relation to volume) but, rather, because viewing 'unsuitable' films, and, in particular, doing so *in public*, could not be easily reconciled with their aspirations as mothers. An inappropriate film choice did not only impinge upon the enjoyment of the film, it could also place the entire legitimacy of attending the cinema with their baby in question. Thus, although enjoying the film was not a pre-requisite for enjoying Watch With Baby, enjoying the experience was dependent on the avoidance of extremes.

## **Conclusion**

This article offers an account of the pleasures, and some of the perils, of 'watching with baby' for a group of Glasgow women at a specific time and place. It demonstrates that the Grosvenor cinema was successful in soliciting and maintaining an audience for dedicated baby screenings in this period through a diverse programme that emphasised recent releases and treated the women as adults first. However, this only worked when the women were also addressed – by the cinema, the film and their peers – as mums, and were thus able to reconcile their new role with their previous sense of self. In this respect, the environment – and the presence of other mothers and babies within it – was absolutely central to the cinematic pleasures on offer and allowed the women in my study to understand their cinemagoing relative to their ideas of 'good' parenting.

In expanding this work, it would be useful to explore the relationship between parenting ideals and audience membership more fully, building on the kind of work Matt Briggs (2005, 2006) has undertaken in relation to television. In retrospect it seems obvious that asking the women about their aspirations as parents, as well as about their sources of parenting information and advice, would have enabled a more robust contextualisation of their viewing experiences. That I failed to do this perhaps says something about the nature of this particular project. As a scholar within Film & Television Studies I was aware that the experience of 'watching with baby' raised interesting questions, but if I wanted to explore these questions 'from the inside' there was only a short window within which to do so. This was an audience which I, like all the women I spoke to, was part of – and could remain part of – for only a short period (up to my son's first birthday). I hope that future work can build on the insights gained from this 'insider' perspective to address broader questions about cinemagoing, parenting and class. Locating these accounts relative to mothers' – and fathers' – engagements with other forms of media, and the discourses they employ to discuss those media, would also be productive.

Of course, new parents are not the only demographic being targeted by cinemas in this way: dedicated screenings for children have a long history; screenings for 'seniors' are fairly commonplace; and the Glasgow Film Theatre now offers dedicated screenings for children with autism (and their families). That the Grosvenor's attempt at a 'Silver Screen' ('seniors') strand was not successful may say something about the demographics of its core audience, but it also points to the need for academics (as well as cinemas) to understand contemporary audiences not only in terms of what they watch and how they make sense of it, but why they want to attend a specific cinema, at a particular time, and as part of a particular kind of audience. For film scholars interested in contemporary cinema, such specialist screenings can offer the potential to re-think key questions around the cinematic apparatus, spectatorship and identity and insist on the importance of cinema as a public, social space that – counter to the very fixed conceptualisation of cinema in much film theory – can be reconfigured to meet the needs of, and enhance the *cinematic* pleasures on offer to, particular audiences.



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### ***Acknowledgements***

My thanks to my interviewees and their babies for generously giving their time to support this project; to Mark Tisdale (Manager of the Grosvenor); and to Christine Geraghty and Ian Garwood for their comments on the work in progress. An earlier version of this article was presented at the Edinburgh International Film Audiences Conference and at a Media research seminar at De Montfort University: thanks to participants in both these events for their useful feedback. Finally, warm thanks to Alec Garwood, my mini research assistant.

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<sup>i</sup> Attempts to recruit fathers for interview were unsuccessful. There are many possible reasons for this – not least that fathers may be more likely to be in full-time employment during their child's first year – but it is worth noting that men largely existed on the fringes of the cinema community even when they were present. They were less easily integrated into the casual conversations and sharing of experiences and did not seem to have the multiple sites of connection that many of the women shared. This is reflective of men's marginalisation in baby culture more generally and there is a further project to be done exploring men's likely very different experiences of watching with baby.

<sup>ii</sup> Women's perceptions of their babies' experiences are discussed in Boyle (2009).

<sup>iii</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout.

<sup>iv</sup> Although this was undoubtedly more true for first-time parents – myself included – the four women I interviewed who had more than one child talked similarly about learning the routines and peculiarities of their new baby whilst also learning a new role as a mother-of-two (or three), a role in which Watch With Baby still had a part to play.

<sup>v</sup> Seven, in an adult audience of 46 (around 15%): only one of these men was not with a female partner.